

INTERVIEW WITH GAYATRI GOPINATH: QUEER DIASPORAS AND ARCHIVAL PRODUCTION

INTERVIEWERS:

VERENA LINDEMANN LINO

Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC)
verenalindemann@campus.ul.pt

VERA HEROLD

Universidade Católica Portuguesa
vera.herold@sapo.pt

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Gayatri Gopinath is Professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, and the Director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University. She works at the intersection of transnational feminist and queer studies, postcolonial studies, and diaspora studies, and is the author of two monographs: *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2005), and *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2018). She has published numerous essays on gender, sexuality, and queer diasporic visual art and culture in anthologies and journals such as *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *GLQ*, and *Social Text*, as well as in art publications such as *PIX: A Journal of Contemporary Indian Photography*, *Tribe: Photography and New Media from the Arab World*, and *ArtReview Asia*.

Key Topics: Queer Diaspora; Alternative Archives; Queer Regions; Migration; Gender and Sexuality; Visuality; Queer Optics; Queer Curation.

In the current issue of Diffractions, we pursue an interdisciplinary perspective on the relationship(s) between archives, migration, and gender. We are interested in exploring why, from the perspective of your work, you think it is important to think these concepts together and explore their potential entanglements.

You have been one of the scholars that have paved the field of Queer Studies in recent years, particularly when it comes to the intersections between gender and sexuality, on the one hand. and migration and diaspora, on the other. We would like to begin our interview with some introductory notes on queer diaspora – a notion that is central to your work. In your first book Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures you suggest understanding queer diaspora as a “conceptual apparatus that poses a critique of modernity and its various narratives of progress and development” (2005, 12). What sort of insides does a queer diasporic framework provide for the understanding of the interrelationship between gender, sexuality and migration?

Gayatri Gopinath:

In *Impossible Desires*, I use the concept of “queer diaspora” to reference how the meanings and manifestations of sexual desire, subjectivity, and practices shift and transform in the context of diasporic movement, migration, and dwelling. I wanted to show how the communal boundaries of both diaspora and nation are consolidated through the institutionalization of heteronormativity, and the subsequent abjection and effacement of particular subjects (deemed sexually and morally “perverse” or abnormal, and/or simply outside the boundaries of intelligibility) and the reification of others (the category of “woman,” for instance). Suturing “queer” to “diaspora” allowed me to wrest “diaspora” away from its more conservative iterations (which are invested in notions of origin, purity, and authenticity), and to instead recuperate the anti-essentialist framings of identity and culture that some articulations of diaspora enable. Thus for me, the concept of queer diaspora provides a way to think about diasporic movement and dwelling outside of fixed notions of origins or blood-based affiliations and kinship. *Impossible Desires* finds alternatives in queer diasporic expressive culture, and everyday forms of queer diasporic worldmaking, that articulate radically expansive visions of “home” and belonging, kinship and community that are not beholden to heteronormative and patrilineal logics.

I would also add that the concept of “queer diaspora” not only productively disorganizes the heteronormative and patrilineal terms of conventional articulations of diaspora; it also disorganizes conventional framings of queerness and its attendant tropes and signifiers, such as the closet, “coming out,” and a politics of visibility. Suturing “diaspora” to “queer” pushes queerness outside of a Euro-American frame and instead demands a theorization of queerness in relation to histories of colonialism, migration, and globalization. The concept of queer diaspora illuminates how the desires, embodiments and socialities of racialized diasporic populations are governed by sexual and gender logics that may be unintelligible within standard Euro-American identity formations of “LGBTQ.” In *Impossible Desires*, I wanted to make apparent how dominant Euro-American formulations of sexual identity adhere to a civilizational discourse that frames sexual subjects that do not cohere within its terms of legibility as pre-modern, backward, and underdeveloped. This framing extends to non-cosmopolitan sexual subjects in the Global South, as well as migrant and racialized populations in the Global North. Instead, the concept of queer diaspora provides a critical interpretive frame through which to read and register as strategic and oppositional those cultural practices (such as silence, invisibility, or the hyperbolic performance of gender) that would otherwise be dismissed as insufficiently political.

Your work on queer diaspora is intimately linked to the production of “alternative archives.” What do you precisely mean by this? And how has your approach to archives and the “stuff” they are made of changed over time?

Gayatri Gopinath:

I understand “alternative archives” in the context of queer diaspora to mean the “evidence” of queer diasporic worldmaking that cannot be captured or codified within conventional archives. Returning to José Esteban Muñoz’s foundational formulation of ephemera as evidence of queer culture, we can ask what archival traces remain of queer diasporic lives, communities, and cultures? These are the queer worldmaking practices of those who are often undocumented or otherwise rendered outside the boundaries of legitimate citizenship, and are only legible within state discourse as criminal or “illegal.” I’m thinking here of the queer kinship arrangements of undocumented, working-class, diasporic queers of color in New

York City, theorized by anthropologist Martin Manalansan, for instance. When seen through a normative gaze, the “stuff” and materiality of these queer households are simply seen as detritus, trash, mess.

I’m also thinking of the club nights, drag performances, parties, parades, political meetings, and other queer worldmaking practices that constitute queer diasporic sociality: some of these practices are indeed captured in photographs, flyers, meeting notes, newspaper articles, and the like that do make their way into conventional archives. Thanks to the work of dogged librarians at NYU, where I teach for instance, the library has acquired the papers of Atif Toor, who runs a monthly queer South Asian party named “Sholay” in New York City that is now in its twentieth year (on hiatus due to Covid). Atif’s collection of memorabilia does indeed document some aspects of queer South Asian life in New York City from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. So in this sense, the lines between alternative archives and dominant archives stretch and blur.

In my current work, I turn to the ways in which queer diasporic artists themselves are engaged in archival excavation, often through an engagement with their own familial histories in the context of diasporic displacement and dwelling. In *Unruly Visions*, for instance, I examine the work of queer South Asian diasporic artists Chitra Ganesh and Allan deSouza, both of whom rework their family photo albums to reflect on the opacity of photographic representation and of the past itself, as well as to suggest a critique of the normative sexual and gendered arrangements that structure dominant familial, national, and diasporic formations. For another example of the artist functioning as archivist, we can turn to the work of Beirut-based artist Akram Zaatari, whom I also write about in *Unruly Visions*. Zaatari excavates the moments of queer desire and sociality in the decades-old photographs of Hashem El-Madani, a studio photographer in South Lebanon (fig 1.). Zaatari does so in order to tell a different story of Lebanon’s past that is not bound to heteronormative nationalist narratives, and to imagine a different future.



Fig.1. “Abed, a tailor, 1948-53,” from *Hashem El Madani: Studio Practices*, courtesy of Akram Zaatar and the Arab Image Foundation.

One aspect we find particularly intriguing in Impossible Desires is how you mobilize the concept of translation. Would you agree that (diasporic) translation is an important form of the archival intervention and critique of queer diasporic practices? An alternative strategy of reading and seeing the archive, so to say?

Gayatri Gopinath:

In *Impossible Desires*, I identified a phenomenon where contemporary South Asian diasporic feminist filmmakers were creating diasporic translations of “originary” national texts, often for explicitly non-South Asian global audiences. I read Indian-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta’s 1996 film *Fire*, for instance, as a diasporic translation of Urdu feminist writer Ismat Chughtai’s brilliant 1942 short story “Lihaaf (The Quilt).” *Fire* translated “Lihaaf” from short story to film, from Urdu to English, from nation to diaspora. Most importantly, *Fire* translated “Lihaaf’s” complex rendering of queer female desire in the context of radically uneven relations of class, generational, and gendered power within an upper class Muslim household, into a narrative of egalitarian female eroticism far more intelligible for a global film audience. In this sense, I do not see the translations that I identify in *Impossible Desires* as alternative strategies for reading and seeing the archive; they

more often than not serve to buttress developmental narratives of colonial modernity rather than dislodge them.

In Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora you focus on visual culture and queer visual aesthetic practices, because of the importance of visibility in colonial modernity and its contemporary resonances. How is this focus on visibility and scopic and sensorial regimes linked to your approach to the “region” and the “production of alternative cartographies”?

Gayatri Gopinath:

I focus on queer visual aesthetic practices, as you say, because of the centrality of visual regimes of colonial modernity in regulating, ordering, and disciplining bodies and desires. These modes of regulation produce a dominant cartographic imagination that manifests in the academy through epistemological formations such as area studies. The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora that interest me in *Unruly Visions* deploy “the region” in both its supra- and subnational senses to disturb and challenge the rubrics of area studies, and the conventional fields and disciplines through which knowledge in the academy is produced. In her 2008 multi-media installation *Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia*, for instance, the Indian artist Sheba Chhachhi re-imagines “Asia” through the pre-modern, cosmopolitan histories of migration between South Asia, China, and the Middle East (fig. 2). As such, *Winged Pilgrims* is a powerful instantiation of a queer framing of the region: one that allows us to grasp the imbrication of multiple times and spaces as it foregrounds region-to-region connectivities. Another queer deployment of the region is apparent in the work of an artist such as Akram Zaatari who, as I mentioned earlier, excavates a visual archive of South Lebanon through the studio photographs of Hashem El-Madani. He does so in order to bring into the present the memory of submerged logics of gender and sexuality that inhere in subnational regional spaces (such as South Lebanon) that run counter to heteronormative framings of the nation. Artists such as Chhachhi and Zaatari thereby mobilize new ways of seeing both regions and archives and put into play an intimate relationship between the two.



Fig. 2. “Kaha: Bird,” from *Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia*, courtesy of Sheba Chhachhi.

An important aspect of your work is a “queer optic” on the interrelation between space and time that disrupts not only dominant readings of the past, but also dominant notions of transnationality. What alternative forms of subjectivity and social life become imaginable through this “nonnormative lens”?

Gayatri Gopinath:

I deploy the notion of a queer optic to reference a way of seeing and sensing both time and space differently, outside of the visual regimes that we inherit from colonial modernity. The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora allow us to glean the imbrication, the promiscuous intimacies, of multiple times and spaces that are typically seen as distinct and discrete. For instance, I am currently writing about the work of Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander, who is best known for her contemporary feminist engagement with the tradition of Indo-Persian miniature painting. I would argue that Sikander’s work instantiates a queer optic that excavates the intimacies of different geographies, temporalities, and histories. In so doing her work, as is the case in the work of the artists I write about in *Unruly Visions*, radically disrupts both art historical and area studies frames and instead makes queer embodiments and queer desires central to an epistemological critique of how knowledge is produced and institutionalized. This is a particularly urgent

project given the rise of right-wing nationalisms both in South Asia and throughout the world that depend on a deadly logic of singularity, purity, and authenticity. In contrast, the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora envision a model of porous, intersubjective, radical relationality, and an interconnectedness of our pasts, presents and futures, that thoroughly repudiate such absolutist logics. We urgently need such visions now more than ever.

In Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora you write about the notion of “care-taking”, thus taking curation beyond the “repositioning” and “re-arrangement” of a given collection (2018, 4). This care-taking becomes especially apparent when tending to what you call “minor histories” (2018, 8) that offer an alternative to the archives’ “surveilling gaze” on the past (7), thus making archival work always-already a queering of the archive when it looks for that which is or should remain hidden. Can you describe how this practice of caring for and about the past can create new configurations of the hegemonic archive and the emergence of alternative archives, but also what the limits and “risks” of queer curation are?

Gayatri Gopinath:

In *Unruly Visions*, I wanted to highlight the notion of queer curation as care-taking in relation to the work that we do as queer scholars. There is an ethics and a sense of responsibility that we as queer scholars have to the artists, the aesthetic practices, the communities, that we write about. To engage with these artists and cultural texts often means, as you suggest, a careful attention to the minor: to that which has been devalued and dismissed, overlooked and disregarded, within dominant metrics of worth and intelligibility. Tending to the minor means being exquisitely attuned to those queer world-making practices that cannot and do not enter into the official archives of family, community, or national formation.

Furthermore, as queer critic Ann Cvetkovitch notes, queer artists often engage not only in archival excavation but quite explicitly in a queer curation themselves. I would say that Shahzia Sikander’s juxtapositions of iconic femininity from different art historical traditions is an instance of queer curatorial practice (a recurring trope in her painting is the erotic pairing of an eleventh century Indian Devata figure with Bronzino’s sixteenth century Greco-Roman Venus, for

instance). So too is Akram Zaatari's careful selection, ordering, and re-presentation of El Madani's photographs in order to make apparent their queer valences.

The dangers or limits of queer curation as a project of care-taking and as a project of radical juxtaposition is twofold. First, care-taking and care-work in general are overdetermined in terms of race and gender: so often care-work is devalued as gendered and racialized labor. The task of the queer critic then, is precisely to revalue that which is seen as without value, including one's own labor, and to do so in terms that question the very notion of value itself. Second, radical juxtaposition runs the risk of decontextualizing a work, of being insufficiently attuned to the specificity of its historical valences and to therefore engage in facile or surface comparisons. The "caring for" a work, therefore, must take the form of being deeply attentive to the cultural context out of which the work emerges in order to situate it within a history and genealogy, and only then to tease out the unexpected resonances between works that seem radically dissimilar.

As a sort of closing note, we would like to hear your view and maybe also some advice for young scholars confronted with issues of "marginality" and "marginalization," with challenges linked to academic boundaries and "questions of legitimization" of research topics, subjects and approaches. This final "question" or rather "inquiry" refers not only to your experience as a queer of color scholar working in the fields of gender and sexuality studies and diaspora studies, but also to the way your work implies a refashioning and critique of dominant forms of (academic) knowledge production by challenging clear-cut borders of areas and disciplines. What are the implications for your research practice? And what would you recommend to young scholars facing similar challenges (and opportunities)?

Gayatri Gopinath:

Well, I don't have any easy answers to this. The truth is that the academy has still not caught up to the kinds of work that many of us do that is in fact unruly and undisciplined. On the one hand, there are more university initiatives than ever before that are meant to foster interdisciplinarity: interdisciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity have long been academic buzzwords. And yet, still, projects that cross borders, disciplines, fields, areas, and mediums are invariably cast as incoherent

and lacking expertise. Doing such work will most definitely knock you out of the running for particular jobs. At the same time it may just make you a perfect fit for others. It is no coincidence that I have found an institutional home not in a traditional discipline (such as English) but rather in gender and sexuality studies programs and cultural studies departments. My cohort of queer scholars is now quite senior, and I would like to think that the work that we collectively do as queer scholars engaged in diaspora studies and queer of color critique has opened up a spaces in the institution for those of you who come after us. So I would say keep doing the work that moves you the most, that you find most urgent and necessary despite the fact that it may not “fit” in any easy way into standard institutional parameters. The change may be incremental but it is happening.

Finally I want to say that I have found all your questions to be so thoughtful and generative; I am very moved by your own ethical and careful engagement with my work. Truly this has been a gift and an honor, thank you.

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